

# THE INSPIRE-SL MODEL: INSTITUTIONALIZING INCLUSIVE AND SUSTAINABLE SERVICE-LEARNING IN INDIAN HIGHER EDUCATION

**Bonnie Amonge Crerar<sup>1</sup>** <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9413-9059>

<sup>1</sup>Assam University, Silchar, India

Corresponding author: [bonnieamonge1@gmail.com](mailto:bonnieamonge1@gmail.com)

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## Abstract

The present day context has made one realize that education for a long time has been lopsided by its narrow focus on academic achievement or professional preparation. Today the world needs well rounded individuals whose head, heart and hand are in alignment with itself as well as with others. Hence, Universities today are increasingly seen as spaces that must help students become socially responsible, ethically sensitive, environmentally conscious, and actively engaged citizens. In India, the implementation of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 has further highlighted the importance of experiential learning, community engagement, multidisciplinary education, skill development, and holistic growth. At the same time, higher education institutions continue to face serious challenges such as rising social inequality, graduate unemployment, environmental concerns, digital exclusion, and a growing disconnect between classroom learning and real-life social issues. These realities call for educational approaches that connect knowledge with lived experiences and encourage students to become active contributors to society.

Service-learning addresses the gap between classroom learning and students' real-life needs by combining academic study with community engagement. Unlike traditional outreach that focuses only on service, service-learning fosters mutual learning among students, teachers, organizations, and the community. It allows learners to apply theoretical knowledge in practical situations while

developing essential skills such as leadership, empathy, and social awareness.

Service-learning in Indian higher education is fragmented and overly dependent on individual faculty members or departments. Many initiatives are merely voluntary or short-term efforts, failing to be integrated into the curriculum, institutional policies, or long-term planning. This severely limits the transformative potential of service-learning. There is an urgent need for a comprehensive framework to systematically embed service-learning within the core academic and social mission of higher education institutions.

This paper decisively addresses the critical need for the institutionalization of inclusive and sustainable service-learning in Indian higher education by introducing the INSPIRE-SL Model. This conceptual and analytical framework is firmly grounded in the principles of experiential learning, transformative learning, social constructivism, critical pedagogy, and community-engaged education. It draws upon the influential educational theories of John Dewey, David Kolb, Paulo Freire, Lev Vygotsky, and Andrew Furco.

Moreover, this model aligns seamlessly with the ambitious goals set forth by the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, the University Grants Commission (UGC) Guidelines for Fostering Social Responsibility and Community Engagement in Higher Education Institutions in India 2.0, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and the vision of Viksit Bharat 2047. It is also designed to address the diverse realities of Indian higher education, encompassing cultural diversity, indigenous knowledge traditions, tribal and rural contexts, regional inequalities, and the urgent demand for a digitally enabled yet human-centred educational approach.

The INSPIRE-SL Model views institutionalization as a gradual and ongoing process by which service-learning becomes a core component of the everyday culture and operations of higher education institutions. It emphasizes that service-learning should not be confined to isolated projects but should be integrated into the institution's vision, curriculum, teaching and learning processes, research activities, community partnerships, and assessment practices.

The acronym INSPIRE reflects seven interconnected dimensions that are essential for developing sustainable and inclusive service-learning practices:

1. Institutional Commitment and Inclusive Policy (I).
2. Needs-Based Community Partnership (N).
3. Sustainable Curriculum Integration (S).
4. Participatory Pedagogy and Reflective Practice (P).
5. Innovation, Interdisciplinarity, and Indigenous Knowledge (I).
6. Research, Reciprocity, and Resource Support (R).
7. Evaluation, Equity, and Empowerment (E).

Together, these dimensions provide a practical and comprehensive framework for enhancing service-learning in higher education institutions.

The model emphasizes that effective service-learning requires robust institutional support, inclusive policies, prepared faculty, equitable student involvement, ethical community engagement, and ongoing reflection and evaluation. It promotes credit-bearing and outcome-focused service-learning experiences that align with local community needs, sustainability issues, and social justice perspectives. The framework specifically highlights the importance of including marginalized and underserved communities, gender sensitivity, environmental sustainability, cultural responsiveness, digital inclusion, and the recognition of indigenous knowledge systems. By doing so, it encourages educational institutions to implement practices that are locally relevant and socially responsive.

The INSPIRE-SL framework highlights the importance of reflection, research, and evidence-based improvements for ensuring long-term sustainability and impact. It promotes participatory action research, community feedback, reflective journaling, social impact assessments, and institutional self-evaluations. The framework advocates for a collaborative approach in which institutional leaders, faculty members, students, service-learning centers, and community stakeholders work together as partners in planning, implementation, and evaluation. Additionally, the model supports the thoughtful integration of technology through blended and e-service learning practices, while emphasizing that empathy, human relationships,

reciprocity, and ethical engagement remain central to the learning process.

The paper argues that the institutionalization of inclusive and sustainable service-learning can significantly contribute to the holistic development of students. It strengthens civic responsibility, ethical leadership, sustainability awareness, employability, collaboration, critical thinking, and cultural understanding.

At the institutional level, this framework can enhance curriculum relevance, facilitate interdisciplinary collaboration, boost research productivity, improve accreditation practices, and promote community engagement, all while supporting the effective implementation of NEP 2020 reforms. At the societal level, the model fosters social inclusion, community empowerment, sustainable development, and participatory citizenship by encouraging universities to engage actively with real-world challenges and drive social transformation.

The study concludes that service-learning should not be seen as a peripheral or optional activity within higher education. Instead, it should become a core educational philosophy that shapes the academic and social missions of universities and colleges. The INSPIRE-SL Model thus provides a comprehensive, contextually relevant, and forward-looking framework for reimagining higher education through inclusive, sustainable, community-engaged, and transformative learning practices. This approach prepares students not only for careers but also for responsible and meaningful participation in society.

DECLARATION: AI WAS USED TO BRAINSTORM ON THE IDEA OF THE MODEL